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August 15, 2021: What Has Gone Wrong and What Can We Do About It?

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Title: What Has Gone Wrong and What Can We Do About It?

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8/15/2021--In 2019, I published a book review of three books in the Tulsa Law Review. These books were all about the divisions in American public life. The name of the book review was, WHAT HAS GONE WRONG AND WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT? Most of the Introduction follows.

Introduction: This Moment in American Politics

It is a mark of how bad things are in American public life that most people who read the title of this book review will immediately understand that it refers to the current state of politics in the United States.

Here is how Lawrence Lessig describes our condition in America, Compromised, one of the three books discussed in this review:

"There is not a single American awake to the world who is comfortable with the way things are. Every one of us has a sense if only a sense that with our nation, something is not quite right We've not been as divided as a people since the Civil War."

Now, ignore Lessig's smug reference to Americans "awake to the world." That is his partisanship showing, a matter I return to below. Lessig is saying that all or most Americans know that something is wrong. Perhaps that by itself is not so shocking. The reader probably feels that way, too. I know I do.

But why are we so sure that anything is wrong? The unemployment rate is hovering around 4%. The economy is growing. Our military is still engaged in the Middle East, but at low levels. Racism is declining, as evidenced by the effectiveness of the Black Lives Matter movement in bringing attention to police wrongdoing and the historically low black unemployment rate. The #MeToo movement has exposed various forms of sexual oppression and harassment in the workplace. Nothing is objectively wrong in America right now.

Yet, despite all that, Lessig is obviously correct that Americans are divided--more than at any time since the Civil War.

Think about that. At the time of the Civil War, Americans were divided over slavery. A moral demand for freedom was imposing itself, threatening the fundamental social, economic and political arrangements of nearly half the country. Americans would go to war against each other over that demand for freedom, resulting in over 200,000 combat deaths.

Compared to slavery, what are Americans divided over today? Free trade? Wages have stagnated, but for most people are not actually falling. People are economically stressed, but how could that make us more divided than we were during the Depression?

White resentment over the loss of privilege is certainly a part of this story of division. But, Pennsylvania was won by President Donald Trump when Erie County, which President Barak Obama in 2012 had won by sixteen percentage points, went Republican. The story of how that happened cannot be simple racism.

Some people would say that abortion is a moral issue equivalent to slavery, but surely that view is a minority one. In one survey, only 45% of registered voters said that abortion was "very important" to their votes in the 2016 Presidential election.

And it is not really the case that Americans are divided over President Trump. It would be more accurate to say that the deep divisions in America allowed him to become President in the first place. We must remember that as early as 1993, not a single Republican in Congress voted for President Bill Clinton's first budget. American divisions were becoming set as early as twenty-five years ago.

In the Jewish tradition, the rabbis taught that Jerusalem fell to the Romans because of "baseless hatred." The defenders of the city were so divided that they could not concentrate on its defense.

Surely that description--baseless hatred--is the most accurate description of America today. We hate and mistrust each other and we seize on issues not so much because we disagree, but in order to express that very mistrust and hatred.

But why do we hate each other? And what can be done about it? That is the question books like these seek to answer.

In a recent book review, Daniel Drezner refers to the "21 st-century cottage industry of books devoted to how things went off course." The bar for adding to this genre, Drezner says, should be high. The three books reviewed here meet that bar. Each book has an important story to tell concerning what went wrong and how America might go forward in a better direction.

Nevertheless, in the end, there is something elusive about America's current moment that none of these books, nor indeed any of the other books in this genre, can quite touch. As I suggest at the end of this review, in each of these three books there is a hint of a spiritual crisis--a crisis in American secularism and American religion--that they do not address, but which eventually will have to be confronted if America is ever to heal.

The title of the review was a play on the title of one of the books under review: *Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What Can We Do About It?*, by Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens. (The third book, in some ways the most important, was *How Democracies Die*, by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt.)

As the reader can see from the Introduction, I thought the three books had ultimately failed in their essential purpose—explaining why American public life is broken and giving us a path back to health.

I thought I knew then what was wrong, and it had to do with the Death of God and what that absence meant for Americans' understanding of the universe we live in. America needed a new, non-God-centered, account of the meaning of life.

Things are not much better now, two years later. Trump is out, which means the tone of American public life is improved. But in terms of division, a virus variant is raging because millions of Americans refuse to take a life-saving vaccine, and most government leaders refuse to require vaccination, on account of politics. That's pretty crazy.

In my new book, *The Universe Is On our Side: Restoring Faith in American Public Life*, I believe I have succeeded in diagnosing what went wrong in America and what we can do about it. The book will be published in October by Oxford University Press.

Only you can decide if I am right.